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Genres

Poetic genres are not predetermined, unchanging categories but collections of texts that are perceived to share features. When we recognize generic categories as malleable, we are more likely to welcome a wider range of texts and authors, including women writers, into the literary canon. And a more inclusive canon leads to a wider recognition of formal shapes and rhetorical effects within each genre. Studying poetry by women gives us a fuller understanding of the constraints and potentials of each genre. Of course, Victorian women writers were constrained not only by literary conventions but also by social conventions and institutional inequalities. Isobel Armstrong has explored the ways female poets both worked within and critiqued conventions of gendered experience, but she also warns, “a concentration on moments of overt protest can extract the content of a direct polemic about women’s condition in a way which retrieves the protest, but not the poem.”¹ In what follows, I trace women poets’ protests while attending to poetic form in experiments with genre, from the sonnet to the epic. As we shall see, women poets often protest social limitations while pushing against generic constraints, finding previously untapped potential in a genre, or offsetting the limitations of one genre by incorporating the strengths of another.

Sonnet Sequences

A sonnet is made up of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter connected through an intricate rhyme scheme (though in *Modern Love* [1862], George Meredith expands his sonnets to sixteen lines). The sonnet flourished in Elizabethan England, retreated in the eighteenth century, and reemerged with new subject matter in the Romantic period with the success of Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784). In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB) returned the sonnet sequence to a focus on love, yet she inverted or reimagined traditional Petrarchan conceits. Whereas in sonnet sequences by Petrarch, Dante, Sidney, and Spenser,

a male speaker praises a beautiful, virtuous, and unobtainable woman, EBB presents a female speaker's passionate, requested love for a man.

Sonnets from the Portuguese is based on EBB's courtship by Robert Browning; the title veiled the autobiographical elements by suggesting that the poems were translations of a preexisting work. In the opening sonnet, a personified figure claims the speaker and reveals himself to be "Not Death, but Love" (I.14).² Autobiographically, this evokes EBB's years as an invalid and her initial reluctance to marry before she partially recovered and accepted Robert Browning's proposal. Generically, EBB repurposes the role of death in sonnet sequences: here it is not a threat to the beloved meant to inspire the pursuit of pleasure, the legacy of offspring, or immortalization through poetry itself, but rather a temptation that the poet must overcome before pursuing love. As she struggles with her choice, she presents herself as pale and weak, and as a lesser poet than her beloved: "an out of tune / Worn viol" that may produce beautiful music in her beloved's "master-hands" (XXXII.7–8, 13). This self-presentation "violates both literary and social decorum," Dorothy Mermin argues, because it "present[s] as object of desire an ill and aging woman."³ In sonnet 23, however, the speaker boldly declares her choice of love rather than death: "I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange / My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!" (XXIII. 13–14) The poet joyfully declares her love in EBB's most famous sonnet, which begins "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (XLIII.1). As Mermin explains the sequence's revolutionary aspirations, the speaker "is the reluctant object of a poet's courtship, but she is also the sonneteer . . . both poet and poet's beloved" – a "doubling" that strives to "replac[e] hierarchy by equality."⁴ By offering a radical alternative, EBB implicitly critiques the institutional inequalities women faced in marriage, and women's distorted representations in poetry by men.

Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (1881) overtly comments upon its relation to earlier amatory sequences and their silencing of women. Each of its fourteen Petrarchan sonnets begins with epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch. An introductory note explains that the title, which means "unknown lady," refers to Rossetti's desire to imagine a beloved woman of Renaissance sonnet sequences speaking for herself. The poems trace the speaker's intense, though ultimately unfulfilled, love for a man, and her greater love for God. Formally, the poems ostentatiously repeat words, as in the lines: "For verily love knows not 'mine' or 'thine'; / With separate 'I' and 'thou' free love has done, / For one is both and both are one in love" (4.9–11).⁵ In such statements of the loss of individual identity, John Holmes reads the lovers as finding "commonality interpreted as mutual self-abnegation," while Amy Billone sees the speaker's self-assertion in the

sheer frequency of the words “I” and “me.”⁶ In *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti models the speaker’s relationship with God on romantic love; in *Later Life*, another sonnet sequence (1881), she uses Christ as a model for what human love should be.⁷ Rossetti again insistently repeats words, as when she addresses God: “If making makes us Thine then Thine we are, / And if redemption we are twice Thine own” (3.9–10). The twenty-eight sonnets focus on the speaker’s relationship to God through the journey of life and end with the speaker’s anticipation of her own death. Rossetti’s hyperbolic constraint and repetition express self-abnegation; demonstrate her mastery of the sonnet form; and create a forceful, distinctive voice.

Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* (1895) depicts both the depths of a mother’s love and the unidealized, ambivalent aspects of parenthood. The sonnets chart a complex pattern of memory and anticipation as the speaker considers her daughter at different ages. Webster also critiques Victorian gender ideology, perhaps most overtly in sonnet 11:

’Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
 The woman’s love, wife’s, mother’s, still will hold,

 So in a thousand voices has the strain
 Of this dear patient madness been retold,
 That men call woman’s love. (XI.1–7)⁸

Webster emphasizes her point through the dual meaning of “strain,” which conveys the music or poetry through which men expressed idealized views of women’s love, and the pressure, effort, or injury such ideals force upon women. Webster frequently uses Petrarchan conceits, and though Melissa Valiska Gregory suggests that such “clichéd metaphors” derive from “a literary tradition that unreasonably insists upon total feminine purity,”⁹ Webster often repurposes Petrarchan conceits for feminist ends. The speaker lists her daughter’s beautiful features, but rather than compare each to a precious jewel (as in a blazon, common to sonnets), she links each to admirable qualities in her daughter’s personality (II.1–14). Later, the daughter refuses to see her mother as aging: the speaker declares, “She will not have it. Loverlike to me, / She with her happy gaze finds all that’s best” (XVI.9–10). As John Holmes argues, Webster here “invert[s] the conventional trope of the sonneteer bestowing immortality on his (female) beloved through verse. Here it is the female object of the sonnet who becomes the gazer, so objectifying the speaker herself and keeping her from aging. Both mother and daughter are both subjects and objects, and their relationship is reciprocal.”¹⁰ Once again, a female sonneteer reimagines the gendered

dynamics of the amatory sequence and depicts a woman in a reciprocal relationship, rather than as a silent and subservient object.

Dramatic Monologues

The great generic invention of Victorian poetry is the dramatic monologue, yet critics have always debated how best to define it. A common but tentative definition has three parts: (1) A dramatic monologue presents the speech (or writing) of one character who is clearly not the poet. (2) The poet's goal is gradually to reveal the speaker's character to the reader. (3) There is often, but not always, an implied auditor to the speech, but we have no direct access to his or her replies. Traditionally, critics have credited Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson with simultaneously, though independently, inventing the form in the 1830s. Yet if we expand our understanding of the genre to include dramatic monologues by women, then we must not only acknowledge earlier examples by Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (L.E.L.) but also modify each of the three features that have defined the genre. Dramatic monologues by women sometimes blur the distinction between speaker and poet, often subordinate the revelation of character to other rhetorical purposes, and occasionally include an explicit response from another character.

Dramatic monologues have a wide spectrum of possibilities for the nearness or distance between the poet and the speaker. Some poems use characters from myth or history to establish a clear gap between author and speaker. Examples include Augusta Webster's "Circe" (1870), "Medea in Athens" (1870), and "Jeanne D'Arc" (1866), and Amy Levy's "Xantippe" (1881). Other poems feature a speaker who represents a class of women but differs from the poet's race or social status, as in Eliza Cook's "Song of the Red Indian" (1845) and EBB's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848), and in monologues spoken by prostitutes, such as Webster's "A Castaway" (1870) and Levy's "Magdalen" (1884). Monologues with the least obvious distance between speaker and poet portray middle-class Victorian women whose experiences with courtship and marriage (or lack thereof) are more or less representative. The young speaker of Webster's "By the Looking-Glass" (1866) feels barred from love because cultural norms deem her unattractive, while the aging, unmarried speaker of Webster's "Faded" (1893) laments her lost beauty and her social insignificance. Three similarly titled poems by Adelaide Anne Procter (1825–64) each present one side of generalized courtship dialogues. In "A Woman's Question" (1858), the speaker asks her fiancé whether or not he is fully committed to their relationship. The speaker of "A Woman's Answer"

(1861) tells her beloved that she loves many things, but all for their associations with him. And in “A Woman’s Last Word” (1861), the speaker ends a relationship with the man she loves.

Such poems, with contemporary female speakers describing easily generalizable experiences, offer the clearest evidence for Dorothy Mermin’s claim that when writing dramatic monologues, “women seem usually to sympathize with their protagonists” and “the poet and the dramatized speaker . . . blur together.”¹¹ Glennis Byron has shown that even in monologues with a historical or mythological speaker and obvious distance between speaker and poet, women authors often sympathize with the speaker’s views.¹² This emphasis on sympathy in dramatic monologues by Victorian women has led critics to reassess Robert Langbaum’s foundational study, which takes the “tension between sympathy and moral judgment” in the poet’s and reader’s responses to the speaker as defining the dramatic monologue.¹³ Rather than establishing a tension between sympathetic identification with and moral judgment of the speaker, women poets often sympathize with the moral judgments their speakers make about other people and social institutions.

As a result, women poets’ “ultimate target is more the systems which produce the speakers than the speakers themselves,”¹⁴ and this leads to their second challenge to traditional definitions of the dramatic monologue. In many monologues by women, the revelation of the speaker’s character is not the primary rhetorical purpose but is instead subordinated to social critique; such poems illustrate the pernicious ways social inequality shapes women’s characters. As Glennis Byron argues, “the more we move away from seeing the dramatic monologue purely in terms of character study, and the more the canon of the dramatic monologue is expanded, the more central polemic begins to appear to the form.”¹⁵

Three dramatic monologues by Augusta Webster exemplify such polemics. The speaker of “Faded” blames society for the limited roles and value available to women. She observes that “a woman’s destiny and sole hope” is to be a wife and mother (line 102), and women who miss that opportunity must spend years “withering leisurely” (line 45) because of “the merciless world / That bids us grow old meekly . . . / And, being old, be nothing” (lines 51–4). Herbert Tucker finds that Webster’s rhythms often allow for dual readings, either following the overall metrical pattern or deviating for rhetorical emphasis, and these alternate scansion correspond to the speaker’s tension between societal expectations and individual experience.¹⁶ In these lines, we can imagine the speaker submitting to metrical and social expectations by voicing regular iambs in “That bids us grow old meekly,” or voicing her rebellion through a stress cluster: “That bids us grow old meekly.” Webster expresses a similar message, with a similarly defiant possible stress

cluster, in “A Castaway,” in which a courtesan diagnoses that “old” is “The cruelest word that ever woman learns. / Old – that’s to be nothing” (lines 178–80). Webster’s “Castaway” also criticizes “the silly rules this silly world / Makes about women!” (lines 377–8), including ineffectual methods to educate them, and condemns the hypocrisy and destructiveness of “the virtuous worthy men / Who feed on the world’s follies, vices, wants, / And do their businesses of lies and shams” (lines 92–4). In these and other critiques, “the speaker’s astute social and economic analysis and her comments on the inequalities that cause and perpetuate prostitution appear, on the whole, to be thoroughly endorsed by the poet herself.”¹⁷ Webster’s greatest challenge in eliciting the reader’s sympathy may be “Medea in Athens”; Medea is infamous in Greek myth for murdering her children to avenge her husband Jason’s abandonment of her. In Webster’s poem, Medea likens her abandonment to being “put aside like some slight purchased slave” (line 224), and she blames Jason and her “dreadful marriage oaths” for her violent actions (line 208). As Melissa Valiska Gregory interprets the poem, it “contains the seeds of a wide-ranging social critique, one that implicates the ideological structures of marriage itself.”¹⁸ In these three Webster poems, however, there is no auditor for the speaker’s critique, and many women’s monologues portray their speakers as having limited authority and little success in expressing their grievances publicly.¹⁹ Of course, women *authors* are able to articulate such grievances publicly, through their poetry, but they do so from behind a mask. As Isobel Armstrong argues, poems that use dramatic masks “paradoxically make possible, *because* they are distanced as drama, a far more *overt* critique . . . of the cultural construction of the feminine subject.”²⁰

In a few experimental poems, however, an auditor is present and responds, and women poets push against the third defining feature of the dramatic monologue: its very status as a monologue. Glennis Byron has proposed the term “duologue” for these poems in which “two distinct but related monologues are juxtaposed,” often to “suggest the difficulty of ever knowing the other.”²¹ Examples include Webster’s “Sister Annunciata” (1866) and Levy’s “Christopher Found” (1884) and “A Minor Poet” (1884). Most of “A Minor Poet” is spoken by a struggling author just before he commits suicide. Alone in his room, he bids farewell to other poets he admires, including “one wild singer of to-day, whose song / Is all aflame with passionate bard’s blood / Lash’d into foam by pain and the world’s wrong. / At least, he has a voice to cry his pain” (lines 91–4).²² This hints at the speaker’s frustration at his own inexpressiveness, a likely reason for his suicide.²³ The speaker’s own cry of pain is heard only by Levy’s readers; in the poem’s epilogue by the speaker’s friend Tom, we learn that the speaker left no written explanation for his suicide, and that Tom misunderstood his

friend's suffering. The poet thus dramatizes within the poem a flawed communication, in contrast with the message the poet hopes to give more successfully, if more indirectly, to her readers. Rather than writing dramatic monologues in which there are two markedly different intentions in communication – the speaker's rhetorical purpose in talking to the auditor and the poet's purpose of revealing the speaker's character to the reader – many women poets craft monologues in which the poet and speaker share much the same message but have different levels of success in communicating it. Expanding the canon of dramatic monologues shows that the genre has a wider range of rhetorical dynamics than was previously recognized.

Protest Poems and Satiric Poetry

Pointed social critique is by no means limited to the genre of dramatic monologue. Many Victorian women poets protested by speaking on behalf of, rather than through the voice of, the oppressed, and many used direct address to accuse British readers of injustice and exhort them to reform. Identification and sympathy remain important dynamics: according to Dorothy Mermin, middle-class authors saw similarities between their own oppression as women and the more extreme oppression of the poor.²⁴ Sympathy and appropriation, and complex dynamics of voice, pervade many protest poems. Eliza Cook wrote "A Song for the Workers" (1853) in support of shorter hours for shop workers. It praises the virtue and self-respect of hard work but then addresses these workers by asking, "Shall ye be *unceasing* drudges?" (line 21).²⁵ Cook speaks to middle-class readers (and includes herself among them) when she asks, "Shall we strive to shut out Reason, / Knowledge, Liberty, and Health" from workers as a sacrifice "To the mighty King of Wealth?" (lines 45–6, 48). EBB's "The Cry of the Children" (1843) depicts the despair of children condemned to seemingly endless drudgery in mines and factories. As Caroline Levine argues, the poem depicts three types of familial connections and undercuts their claims to organize society.²⁶ EBB addresses her readers as "my brothers" and refers to England as "our happy Fatherland" (lines 21, 24), but she depicts working-class children as lacking comfort from their mothers and from God, who fails to act as a beneficent Father to them. At times, EBB gives voices to the child workers through imagined dialogue:

For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning, –
 Their wind comes in our faces, –
 Till our hearts turn, – our head with pulses burning,
 And the walls turn in their places. (lines 77–80)

Herbert Tucker connects this industrial subject matter to the poem's unusual meter, which he claims is not trochaic but rather stresses only one in every four syllables. "The referent of this precociously laboring, mechanically driven, metronomically merciless prosody," Tucker claims, "is the industrial experience of the child worker on whose behalf Barrett Browning presumes to speak."²⁷ The poem ends with the children's voices and pulses as they curse England for profiting by crushing "a child's heart" (line 154).

Adelaide Anne Procter also uses an array of voices (including her own) to decry the suffering of the poor. In "An Appeal" (1862), she speaks in her own voice, urging the English not to demand that Irish Catholics convert to Protestantism in exchange for food and shelter (a common practice in the English response to the Irish Potato Famine). "Homeless" (1862), in contrast, presents a dialogue of questions and answers to highlight the injustice that criminals, dogs, and economic goods receive better shelter and treatment than homeless children, prostitutes, and the poor do. And in "The Cradle Song of the Poor" (1858), Procter creates a fusion of dramatic monologue and protest poem. Most of the poem is a poor mother speaking to her starving infant, wishing for her child's pain to end in death, and repeating the refrain "Sleep, my darling, thou art weary; / God is good, but life is dreary" (lines 9–10).²⁸ The final stanza shifts to the poet's voice, as she admonishes her audience, "Such the plaint that, late and early, / Did we listen, we might hear" (lines 41–2), and urges them to be more charitable.

Some women writers engaged in public debates not through protests of current social injustices but rather through satires of recent scientific theories. Constance Naden's "Evolutional Erotics" (1887) is a series of four poems that use the structure of dramatic monologues and variations on ballad stanzas for comedic effect, social critique, and the exploration of Darwinian evolution. The speaker of "Scientific Wooing" uses language from his science classes to express his attraction to Mary Maude Trevelyne (whose name may allude to the heroines of two unhappy love poems: the title character of Alfred Tennyson's *Maud* [1855] and Mary Trevellyn in Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* [1858]). Naden plays with a common trope when her speaker compares his beloved to "the palest star / That gleams so coldly from afar" (lines 52–3);²⁹ compare this to the title of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), which means "star-lover and star." But Naden's speaker pursues his comparison with astronomical precision, longs for a spectroscope to analyze her, and speculates that "surely Love's attractive power / Directly as the mass must vary" and hence must gravitationally pull him to her massive dowry (lines 44–5). The speaker plans to woo her with science and logic, and he imagines she will relent by saying,

“*Quod erat demonstrandum!*” (line 84). This final line, “that which was to be proved,” indicates the successful completion of a mathematical proof. Naden undermines the speaker’s confidence, however, with her comedic choice to rhyme “demonstrandum” with “random,” which introduces chance into his desired chain of causes and effects. Naden’s “The New Orthodoxy” takes the form of a letter written by Amy, a student at Girton College, Cambridge, to her sweetheart, Fred. Amy inverts the usual rhetoric of faith and skepticism to voice her alarm that Fred has “been heard to say you can’t / Pin your faith to Darwin” (lines 47–8), and she accuses him that regarding contemporary science, “You’re a hardened sceptic!” (line 40). Her anxiety is so great that she demands an immediate answer from him and implies that their continuing engagement depends on his belief in science. Throughout “Evolutional Erotics,” Naden satirizes and subverts gender stereotypes, including tropes in love poetry, expectations that science is a masculine pursuit, and stereotypes that influence scientists’ understanding of sexuality.³⁰

In the same year, May Kendall published *Dreams to Sell* (1887), which contains a section of poems headed “Science.” The subject matter ranges from geometry to cosmology, but the majority of Kendall’s “Science” poems respond to aspects of evolutionary theory. Two of the funniest, “Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus” and “Lay of the Trilobite,” were previously published in *Punch* in 1885. Both feature talking fossils: the trope of prosopopoeia allows the dead to speak and allows Kendall to bridge the hundreds of millions of years between the lives of these extinct animals and the history of humankind. The Darwinian content of “Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus” is overt. The ichthyosaurus mentions Darwin by name, fixates on the relative merits of its brain and its eyes (organs that were crucial for Darwin’s arguments against natural theology), and reminisces about the age of dinosaurs, when “we dined, as a rule, on each other – / What matter, the toughest survived” (lines 11–12).³¹ The ichthyosaurus envies humankind’s greater intelligence, but the fossil in “Lay of the Trilobite” points out human suffering, confusion, and hypocrisy; expresses satisfaction with its simpler, less conscious existence; and persuades his human listener of the merits of his less intelligent but more peaceful life. John Holmes has observed that in the accompanying illustration in *Punch*, this human auditor resembles Richard Owen, a paleontologist and prominent critic of Darwin, but the trilobite mentions Thomas Huxley, Darwin’s leading defender. The poem, then, presents opposing interpretations of evolution and satirizes “all readings of evolution that see it as progressive.”³² Naden and Kendall both ridicule misapplications of science through experimental poems that combine satire, dramatic monologue, and ballad.

Ballads and Other Short Narrative Poems

Today ballads are typically defined as brief narratives focused on action and dialogue rather than feeling, told impersonally in simple language, with lines of three or four stresses. But as Letitia Henville reminds us, “most poems that were called ‘ballads’ by nineteenth-century poets did not contain all of these features.”³³ Within this malleable genre, female poets depicted and critiqued the constraints placed on women by prescribed gender roles. In EBB’s “The Romaunt of the Page” (1839), a knight and a page pause from fighting in the Crusades to talk, and the knight reveals that he agreed to marry his wife as compensation for her father’s death defending the knight’s father from slander. He has never seen his wife’s face, and immediately after their wedding he left for Palestine. The page’s sister, the page claims, was similarly married without her husband seeing her face, then disguised herself as a page and followed her husband. The knight declares he would never condone such unwomanly behavior in his wife. The page, in despair, allows herself to be slaughtered by Saracens, for the page is actually the knight’s wife. The plot, though contrived, reveals that women are devalued, have limited opportunities, and are used as a means of exchange between men. Jean Ingelow’s “The High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire” (1863) also features the tragic death of a wife. It is spoken by a rural farmer, who tells that his son’s wife and her two children died when the river flooded; when the water dispersed, their bodies were left at his son’s doorstep. The stanza form, intricate rhymes, and frequent repetition evoke Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1842) – another poem about a dead woman carried by a river. As Isobel Armstrong interprets it, Ingelow’s poem literalizes the metaphor of overflow for poetic expression and symbolically presents the annihilation of the female subject.³⁴

Not all narrative poems by women end unhappily. In two allegorical works outside the ballad tradition, Adelaide Anne Procter and Christina Rossetti imagine redemption for their female protagonists. Procter’s “A Legend of Provence” (1861) tells the story of Angela, a novice in a convent whose chief duty was laying flowers by the shrine to Mary. Angela falls in love with a wounded soldier who is treated at the convent; they elope, but she realizes he is unworthy of her. She spends years as a beggar, then returns to the convent, where she sees a vision of herself as an older nun. It is Mary, who has impersonated her and performed her duties in her absence, enabling Angela to return to her life as a nun. According to the narrator, the legend’s lesson is that we all can achieve “Some pure ideal of a noble life” (line 321), for “We always may be what we might have been” (line 330).

A more famous, and more ambiguous, story of redemption is Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862). In it, a young girl exchanges a lock of her golden hair for fruit sold by goblin men. After eating, she longs for more, but denied further access to the fruit, Laura becomes sick and apathetic. Her sister, Lizzie, risks herself to acquire more fruit for Laura; after Laura licks the juice and pulp the goblins have violently smeared on Lizzie, Laura recovers. The ostensible moral is, "there is no friend like a sister / . . . / To fetch one if one goes astray" (lines 562–5). Critics have generally been dissatisfied with such a simple moral for such a complex narrative and have generated an array of allegorical interpretations. Some connect the characters' acts of exchange to broader economic systems and link the profusion of exotic fruit to British imperialism. Other critics focus on the religious themes of temptation, sacrifice, and redemption. And still others emphasize sexuality. When Lizzie returns from the goblin men to save her sister, she exclaims to Laura:

"Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew." (lines 467–70)

Here the sexual implications are too close to the surface to call them subtext, yet the passage can also be read as a version of the Eucharist. This ambiguous allegory rewards multiple readings, and, like Procter's "Legend," it implicitly critiques Victorian culture's ostracism of fallen women by suggesting that women who go astray can be redeemed.

Epics and Verse Novels

Lengthier verse narratives are usually classified as either epics or verse novels, though the boundaries are indistinct and some poets wrote hybrids of the two. Generally, the epic is distinguished from the verse novel by its more elevated style, the breadth and significance of its subject, and its more unified attitude toward its subject – what Mikhail Bakhtin has called epic's "reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view."³⁵ Herbert Tucker's *Epic* discusses nearly 350 long poems with epic pretensions published in Britain in the Romantic and Victorian periods. Of those, only fifty-eight were written by women, and only sixteen of the poems by women were published during Victoria's reign (the others having been published earlier). These sixteen long poems present an array of ambitious subjects, from the English experience of the Napoleonic wars in Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Sons of the Soil* (1840), to Italian unification in

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Garibaldi* (1861), to the Biblical tale of Noah in Jean Ingelow's *A Story of Doom* (1867).

The epic poem with the broadest scope may be Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man* (1889). Parts 2 and 3 offer an allegorical narrative in which a questing soul encounters Love, Sympathy, and Sorrow, ultimately suggesting that ethical striving can overcome suffering and conflict. Part 1, however, narrates the entire history of life on Earth using species and civilizations rather than individual characters and mimics the passage of time through shifting stanza forms. In 862 lines of poetry, Blind narrates the formation of the universe, the evolution of life forms, humanity's discovery of fire, the development of agriculture, the rise and fall of ancient empires, the birth of Christ, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, and the history of technology and art. The poem's variety of stanza forms "mimics the fecundity, profligacy, and unruliness that Darwin identifies with nature itself."³⁶ I argue that the *sequence* of stanza types evokes the passage of time by using forms strongly associated with specific periods in literary history: dactylic hexameter, the meter of classical epics; iambic tetrameter, which is close to the rhythms of medieval ballads; heroic couplets, popular in the eighteenth century; and elaborate stanza forms with intricate rhyme schemes and mixed line lengths, similar to Romantic poets' metrical experiments. Blind, then, reinforces the sense of rapid change through her use of stanza form.

Of much narrower scope, though of no less intensity, is Violet Fane's *Denzil Place* (1875), which offers a scandalously sympathetic depiction of adultery. Its more limited subject, focused on the two lovers and their families and its permissive attitude toward adultery, which was starkly at odds with Victorian cultural values, mark it clearly as a verse novel rather than an epic. As Stefanie Markovits has demonstrated, many Victorian long poems deal with adultery or failed marriages (in contrast to the English novel's reluctance to confront adultery directly), and they use tensions between lyric intensity and narrative progression to present tensions in contemporary ideas about love and marriage.³⁷ Both Fane and her heroine strive, with some success, toward reconciliation between intense but brief experiences and longer trajectories of duration and change.

EBB's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) intermixes lyric intensity with narrative duration and the epic with the verse novel. Its epic scope derives from EBB's ambition to reconcile the Real and the Ideal, which manifests in Aurora's debates with her cousin Romney about the relative merits of poetry's spiritual inspiration and philanthropy's material melioration. Romney's philanthropy is also aligned with social problem novels, while Aurora's growth into a successful poet aligns with the *Künstlerroman* (a novel of artistic

development), and the heroine's courtship aligns with the marriage plot novel (specifically with *Jane Eyre*). Alison Case argues that the *Künstlerroman* and the love plot are in tension, since cultural and literary conventions require the artist-hero of the former to demonstrate narrative mastery over the story but expect the heroine of the latter to be modest and naïve about the direction of her own relationships. Case suggests that the poem's odd temporal form juxtaposes these conventions; the poem's first four books are confidently retrospective, but after the time of events catches up with Aurora's time of writing in Book 5, Aurora writes in a more immediate, diaristic manner, uncertain of the final outcome until she writes the last two books.³⁸ The timing of the final two books is especially strange because Aurora explicitly says she wrote them after the poem's climactic events, yet she narrates them as if she is immersed in those events and unaware of the ending. As I have argued in *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends*,³⁹ this temporal position that seems impossible by novelistic standards is unsurprising by the standards of lyric, which often present the poet's description as if it were simultaneous with the experience described. The generic hybridity of *Aurora Leigh* exposes and offsets the limitations of its component genres when taken individually.

In Book 5 of *Aurora Leigh*, EBB voices her own wide-ranging assessments of poetic genres through her protagonist. As Aurora reviews her poetic career, she claims:

My ballads prospered; but the ballad's race
Is rapid for a poet who bears weights
Of thought and golden image. He can stand
Like Atlas, in the sonnet, – and support
His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars;
But then he must stand still, nor take a step. (5.84–9)

Here she contrasts the “rapid” narration of ballads with the lyric stasis of sonnets and moves from a quick summary of part of her career to dilate on art through an extended simile. Within this simile, her choice of pronouns genders the poet as male, which corresponds to the gender of Atlas and most early sonneteers but is an obvious mismatch to Aurora's and EBB's gender. Gender is further blurred by the “pregnant” content of the male poet's sonnet – one of many instances of maternal imagery in the poem. Another instance occurs in Aurora's admonishment to herself to

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age. (5.213–16)

Neither EBB nor her protagonist flinches from the epic tasks they set themselves. Unhindered by scruples about generic conventions or gender ideology, they apply epic form to their contemporary moment rather than the distant past and in so doing merge novel and epic. The Victorian era as a “double-breasted Age” and the epic poem that captures that age are nourishing and generative. EBB speaks her greatest poetic ambitions through the voice of a fictional character, and her mixture of assertion and indirection, formal experimentation, and desire for social reform epitomizes the aspirations of many of the age’s women poets.

Notes

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